

Robinson-Aiken House
48 Elizabeth Street
Charleston
Charleston County
South Carolina

HABS No. SC-269

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Eastern Office, Design and Construction
143 South Third Street
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

ROBINSON-AIKEN HOUSE

Address: 48 Elizabeth Street, Charleston, Charleston County,
South Carolina.

Present Owner: I'On Lowndes Rhett, 48 Elizabeth Street, Charleston,
South Carolina.

Present Occupant: Mrs. Rhett

Present Use: Residence

Brief Statement of Significance: An unusually complete surviving example of a
fine ante bellum planter's town house group, once
the home of Governor William Aiken.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Original and subsequent owners: John Robinson, original owner, bought the land in 1817. (Charleston County Mesne Conveyance Office, vol. V-8, p. 393 [longhand]). He sold the house in 1826 to William Aiken, Charles Edmonston and Lewis A. Pitray. (Ibid, vol. T-9, p. 238). Governor William Aiken lived here and the house went to his daughter, Mrs. A. Burnet Rhett. (Information from Mrs. I'On Lowndes Rhett.)
2. Date of erection: Between 1817 and 1825, when occupied by John Robinson (Advertisement in Courier [Charleston], September 21, 1825, p. 3.)
3. Notes on alterations and additions: Governor William Aiken improved and added considerably to the house. (Alice R. Huger Smith and D. E. Huger Smith, The Dwelling Houses of Charleston South Carolina, J. B. Lippincott Company, Philadelphia and London, 1917, p. 298.)

Prepared by Beatrice St. J. Ravenel
Architectural Historian
Charleston
July 1958

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: An early 19th century town house with extensive ante bellum additions, containing a monumental entrance hall and other notable interiors. Service buildings are largely preserved.
2. Condition of fabric: Good in most respects.

B. Technical Description of Exterior

1. Over-all dimensions: Main block, about 45' x 66' plus a 12' wide piazza; dining room wing, about 24' x 30'; art gallery, about 25' x 36'. Three stories. The entrance is on the west and the piazza facade is on the south.
2. Foundations: Basement walls extend about 7' above grade and are stuccoed, with rustications on the west facade. The piazza foundation is of piers and arches.
3. Wall construction: Brick bearing walls covered with stucco.
4. Porches:
 - a. Piazza. A painted wooden two-story Charleston piazza extends the length of the south facade, eight bays along the main block and one bay (recessed) along the dining room wing at the east end. Columns are Doric in character, with unfluted slender shafts; their details correspond to those of the Adam style. Entablatures are thin with widely-projecting cornices--the upper one has modillions. Interior porch cornices are simple. Ceilings are of flush boarding. Railings have turned balusters (in excellent condition).
 - b. Entrance stoop. Three marble steps, with nosing, lead up to the entrance door on the west facade.
 - c. Garden entrance stoop. The floor is supported on heavy stucco Doric columns and is reached by a stairway of sandstone (14 risers) which widens toward the lower end. There is a simple wrought iron railing on the stoop and the stairway.
5. South facade:
 - a. Composition. The facade of the main block is flat and symmetrical, with three bays at the first story

and five bays above. A pediment crowns the central part. The piazza is applied to this facade, extending around the corner at the east.

- b. Doors. There is a wide opening at the center of the second story--a doorway with sidelights covered with louvered shutters. It is framed by two Greek Doric columns, fluted, carrying a heavy entablature. The door trim has corner blocks. These details appear to be wood.

At the center of the first story is an elliptical-arched panel of stucco with simple stucco trim, plain impost blocks and keystone. It appears probable that originally there was a doorway opening here.

- c. Windows. A single large opening is located on each side of the central panel, at the first story, apparently altered from the original fenestration. Each has wood trim with corner blocks and a larger block at the center of the head. The windows are triple, the central one being the largest, and extend to the floor. There are divided paneled shutters of four leaves.

There are two windows on either side of the central bay, at the second and third stories. They have six-over-six light, double hung sash, louvered shutters (some deteriorating) hung with strap hinges on pintles. At the center of the third floor is a triple window with two-over-two, six-over-six, two-over-two light sash. In the pediment is a semicircular window.

- d. Cornice. There is a well-developed wooden cornice with modillions; it extends around the house. The pediment has similar moldings along the rake but they do not split in the classic manner. Under each end of the pediment is a large ornamented console, applied to the wall.
- e. Wall details. At the corners are stucco quoins of a kind often found in 18th century French architecture, all being of equal length. The stucco of the wall shows traces of simulated stone joint marking.

6. West facade:

- a. Composition. The larger portion, at the right, has quoins at the corners, three bays of windows on the upper stories, one large window on the

first story, and three windows in a rusticated basement. Upper floors are marked by string courses. The narrower portion, at the left, is recessed about 2'. It is plain except for an entrance-way near street level and a single window at each of the two upper stories. To the left of these three-story portions is a one-story wing (art gallery) with two widely spaced windows, rusticated basement, corner quoins, and brick-and-stucco cornice.

- b. Doorway. The opening is semicircular-arched, with marble keystone, archivolt, and an architrave interrupted by paneled quoins. Within the opening is a door, fanlight, and sidelights with panels below. A carved wooden rope molding inside the masonry opening also separates the divisions of the opening. The door is glazed with an upright oval above a small horizontal panel with clipped corners; it has a brass lock and knob. Over the glazing of the fanlight, door and sidelights is a delicate grille of iron based on an interlacing pattern with horizontal rows of upright elliptical iron rosettes applied to the "net."

This doorway appears to date from the end of the 19th century or the early 20th century.

- c. Windows are similar to their counterparts on the south facade. Sills are of sandstone. Some shutters are missing.
- 7. Chimneys: There are four chimneys with hoods, two along the east wall of the dining room wing, and two along interior wall of the main block, about 12' from the east and west ends.
 - 8. Roof: A hip roof of low pitch covers most of the main block and the dining room wing; its covering is sheet metal with standing seams. The art gallery has a low roof with central skylight. The northern third of the main block of the house appears to have a flat roof. There are no dormers (other than the south pediment).

C. Technical Description of Interiors

1. Floor plans:

- a. The appearance of this house leads me to think that originally it was of a type common in Charleston--two rooms per floor with a central stair hall between them, and a piazza along the

south side. Other parts of the present building appear to be additions built by or before the middle of the 19th century.

- b. Present first-floor plan. In addition to the presumed original house is a narrower portion along the north, containing an entrance hall with monumental stairway at the west, a stair hall at the center, and a small drawing room at the east. Beyond this, at the northeast corner, is a large dining room and a rear stair hall. North of the entrance hall is the art gallery. A modern kitchen adjoins the dining room and rear stair hall, on the north. The ceiling height is about 13'.

On the first floor the presumed original house would have had the east wall of the hall and the stairway removed, the south entrance blocked up, windows enlarged, and a large opening made in the west wall of the hall. Thus, the present two large rooms can be thrown together for social entertainments.

- c. Present second-floor plan. Along the south are two large rooms with a hall between them, and at the north is the central stair hall with a smaller room at each side. In addition, there is the space over the dining room and the rear stair hall. The third-floor plan is basically similar.
- 2. Interior finish and trim--general. Flooring is typically of longleaf yellow pine boards 5" to 6" wide, walls and ceilings are plastered and painted, with a number of plaster cornices and ceiling centerpieces. Openings have painted wood trim and doors are of mahogany. Bases have a plinth and moldings. Most of this detail is of a character popularly called Greek Revival. The condition is excellent in the rooms which are used and good in the others.

3. Interior finish and trim--by rooms:

- a. Entrance hall, on first floor. One enters through the doorway in the west wall and ascends a divided stairway to a gallery (at first-floor level) along the east wall. Under the gallery is a passage at basement level, a few steps below the entrance, reached by a short central flight. The gallery is floored with large marble slabs supported by a pair of fluted marble Greek Doric columns.

The two main flights of the stairway are self-supporting, of ten marble steps each, with nosing.

The lower steps wind toward the entrance and the railing curves toward the newel. The railing is of cast iron--highly ornamental--with a mahogany handrail; balusters are vertical, in the form of conventionalized foliage, every third one bearing a large palmette at the bottom. The gallery railing is continuous with the stair rails but is treated with large rosettes instead of balusters.

At the ceiling is a large plaster cove; below this is a plaster cornice of very slight projection, consisting of a simple Greek fret, a band of square guttae above it, and a crowning band of acanthus leaves.

Doors at the first-floor level have wide pilaster trim, with ornamental corner blocks and molded plinths; those at the basement level have simpler pilaster trim. The doors have two vertical molded panels and are hung on two butts.

From the center of the ceiling hangs a large ornamental bronze chandelier with details of Graeco-Roman character.

- b. Dining room, on first floor. There is a large triple window at each end (north and south), a projecting chimney with fireplace centered on the east wall, and two doorways on the west wall. Floor boards average about 4" in width. There is a molded plaster cornice in which the soffit predominates. Door and window openings have wood pilaster trim 12" wide, with corner blocks ornamented with carved acanthus leaves. Over the center of the windows is a long block ornamented with a symmetrical spray of acanthus leaves. Doors have two vertical molded panels.

The fireplace is framed with black marble antae carrying a two-piece entablature of plain design. In the opening is an ornamental cast iron grille.

The ceiling has a circular plaster centerpiece with 12 radiating acanthus leaves enclosed within a plain band, then a band with grape and leaf motives in relief, a plain band, and a guilloche band with rosettes. From this centerpiece is suspended a bronze oil-burning light fixture with five burners; five ornamental chains connect to the outer rim and at the center is a chain with spherical counterweight. The fixture is ornamented with conventional foliage and follows Graeco-Roman forms.

- c. Small drawing room. This is located on the first floor, between the dining room (a narrow hall being interposed) and the stair hall. Its details are very similar to the dining room. There is a large triple window on the north wall, a fireplace on the south wall, and a door in each of the other walls. There is a plaster cornice and a simple plaster centerpiece in the ceiling, from which is suspended a light fixture generally similar to the one in the dining room.
- d. Stair hall. This room is rectangular and contains a wooden stairway disposed about an elliptical well, which extends from the first floor to the third floor. From the first floor level a triple opening with a door leads (north) to the garden; above this are two landings, each with a triple window. The stair has an open string, and railing with two turned-and-octagonal balusters to each tread, and heavy mahogany handrail. At the third floor ceiling is a plaster cornice, and centerpiece consisting of 12 radiating acanthus leaves surrounded by a fret band. A wainscot ascends the stair from the second to the third floor.
- e. Second-floor hall. There is an elliptical wood archway between the stair hall and the hall. It has triple reeded colonnettes within the reveal and a single reeded colonnette at the jamb, with a two-piece entablature for impost. The soffitt is paneled. There is gouge-work ornament between the colonnettes. In the center of the hall ceiling is a small plaster rosette. Doors are six-panel and the openings have architrave trim.

There is an elliptical-arched opening at the south end of this hall, leading to the piazza. It appears probable that this is an original doorway opening, to which was later applied the Greek Doric frontispiece described above (see "South facade").

- f. Art Gallery. This room is the one-story wing just north of the entrance hall, from which it is entered by a doorway at the northeast corner of the hall, through a small triangular hall in the corner of the art gallery. The other three corners of the room contain niches. There are two windows, widely spaced, on the west wall and two on the east wall.

The ceiling is plastered and has a small rectangular skylight at the center; the walls are plastered, with a molded wood base. There is a very ornamental plaster cornice around the room, which may be of a

later period than the other details. The ceiling height is about 14'.

Window openings have wood pilaster trim, extending to plinths at the floor. Corner blocks are ornamented. There is a panel below the window stool. The niches and doorway have pilaster trim with an echinus-molded capital at the impost, an archivolt and a "keystone". The fireplace has a marble mantel with arched opening.

- g. Large drawing room, first floor. This room is entered from the stair hall and is located at the southeast corner of the main block. It has a large triple window centered on the east end, and a similar window not centered on the south wall; a large door opening centered on the west wall. There is a plaster cornice and plaster centerpiece, from which is suspended a glass French chandelier. The trim in other respects is similar to that of the other first-story rooms.

D. Site

1. General setting and orientation: This house occupies a lot at the west end of a residential block, about 90' x 320'. The property fronts on Judith Street (south), Elizabeth Street (west) and Mary Street (north). The house is set back about 15' from Judith Street, is approximately at the sidewalk line on Elizabeth Street, and has a spacious garden and accessory buildings on the side toward Mary Street. It is built up to the property line at the east.
2. Enclosures:
 - a. South fence: A fence extends across the frontage on Judith Street and returns about 15' along Elizabeth Street. At the east end is a brick post (Flemish bond) with a stone cap. The fence consists of simple iron palings on a masonry base, which consists of a molded stone base between two plain stuccoed brick fascias.
 - b. Brick wall: A wall extends from the north end of the buildings around the remaining portion of the property. It is about 8' high, with a gabled brick coping, and is laid in Flemish bond. There are higher sections where accessory structures are built against the wall; this condition occurs at the northwest and northeast corners, and about the center of the east and west walls.

- c. Garden gateway. At the center of the wall on Mary Street is a gateway with four tall brick posts; the central opening is for carriages and at each side is an opening for pedestrians. The whole is about 28' wide. The posts have stone caps. The gates are solid, of wood; each leaf of the double central opening is hung on two large iron strap hinges, and has a grille at the top made with turned balusters. Each small gate has a grille made of slats at the top.
3. Outbuildings: Adjoining the lower wings of the house to the north are two large service buildings, one at the east and another at the west property line. At the north-west and northeast corners of the yard are brick necessities. Halfway along the west garden wall is a cow house; there are only meager remains of a similar one opposite it on the east garden wall. (These outbuildings are described in separate reports.)
4. Landscaping: The open court defined by the house and the two large service buildings appears to have been paved with brick; some sections, laid in a herringbone pattern, still remain. The north portion of the yard, about 90' x 130', appears to have been treated as a garden.

Prepared by Harley J. McKee, Architect
National Park Service
August 1962

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